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“Follow Me”

or

The Secret of Happiness

(Companion Sermon to Self-Interest, the Secret of
Eternal Life)

—BY—

REV. THOMAS VAN NESS

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Second Church in Boston

Founded 1649 A. D.

Copley Square

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Francis R. Torrance, M.D.
Dec. 16, 1903

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“FOLLOW ME.”



What ought I to do if I join with you?

That is the question which has been asked of the Church by thousands of human beings, it was the question asked by those first Galileans who came under the spell of the Master's preaching. To that question his simple answer was "Follow me." We know now what it meant for them to follow him for we can see the whole road, the end as well as the beginning. They did not know, for as yet Jesus had not unfolded his plans. Volunteering to follow him, therefore, required as much faith as it takes on the part of the recruit to unhesitatingly follow the general who may lead his army by a short cut to honor or victory or, by devious and fatiguing ways, to defeat, wounds and death.

And yet in a way those first disciples did know what was before them; they knew, or some of them knew, what Jesus had set before himself to accomplish. In his native town of Nazareth when he was asked to read the Sabbath lesson, Jesus read from Isaiah and proclaimed his intentions in the very words of the prophet, "I am come," he said, "so that the blind may see. I am come to bind up the broken-hearted, to set free the imprisoned, to comfort the sorrowing; to speak glad tidings to the poor."

In all this there is no word said about bringing instruction or æstheticism. Education, as the word is ordinarily used, that is, knowledge of botany, grammar, geography, and the like, was no part of Jesus' program. Culture, as the word is ordinarily used, that is, a refined and delicate sense of music, painting, sculpture, manners, the social graces, was no part of Jesus' program. Examined in detail, it will be seen that peace and joy are the qualities promised; certain happy states of feeling, in a sentence the mission of Jesus was to make people happy.

How did he go about his mission? How did Jesus try to make people happy?

First by telling them who were the fortunate and happy ones and thus directing attention to certain qualities of mind and heart. In this list of happy people he did not place the men and women who were usually supposed to be Fortune's favorites, those possessed of wealth or of military power, those who occupied high social and political station, those who had large cultivation and were the poets and scribes of the land. No; none of these are mentioned. Strange as it may seem, the fortunate ones, the really happy people, are those who are kind and gentle, for eventually they shall inherit the earth; they are the men and women who are mercifully disposed, who are peace-loving and peace-making; they are the citizens who because of their moral bravery and rectitude are reviled and persecuted. Such truth-loving and courageous souls can well rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is to be their future reward. Above all others they are the successful in life, the actually happy ones, who are pure in thought, for to them shall be accorded the vision of God.

Kindness, peacefulness, purity; these are the bed-rock qualities upon which must be built the character of that

man or woman who wishes to be classed among the fortunate ones; who hopes to enter into the realm of joy and happiness.

Now all this is interesting and in a way valuable as a program, as the declaration of a system, but if Jesus had stopped with this enumeration of essential qualities; if he had gone no further than to express his intention of preaching good tidings, of binding up the broken-hearted, and of giving beauty and the oil of joy for mourning, why then his program would have done little more for the world than the promulgation of many another beautiful system.

"This program I mean to put into effect; this happy life I mean to live. If you too wish to live it, follow me." When a man talks like that he is always sure of followers. The early disciples followed Jesus to see how he would make real his theories and how in a community filled with cruelty, strife and harsh judgments he would maintain a pure, kindly and peace-loving disposition.

Writing sometime after his Master's crucifixion, one of his biographers tells us that Jesus spent his days in going about doing good. When we enquire as to these good deeds we find them to be in the nature of healing, in bringing quiet and calm to the hysterical and epileptic, in acting with courtesy and kindness to the poor and the heathen, in visiting on terms of social equality those who were outcasts and publicans, and in proving himself a friend to the depressed, the weak and the bereaved.

Following Jesus today then means acting as he acted.

But, we may be told, men and women of this generation have not the power to restore sight to the blind, or hearing to the deaf.

I answer that if we cannot give sight to the blind, we can help support an institution for the blind, or give money to erect a kindergarten institution for blind children, we can read to those who have lost their sight, or sing to them or visit them. So, too, even if we cannot feed a multitude of persons we may be able, if we are in the transportation business, to do something to more equitably distribute food or make it cheaper; if we are farmers we may do something towards making it more plentiful. In the late coal famine the man who had a large share of coal and sold it to the poor at a price bringing it within their means was as truly following Jesus as those who followed in his direct footsteps.

The bed rock qualities, I said, upon which Jesus would have his disciples build their character were kindness, peacefulness and purity. Is there anything about these qualities which limits them to the early centuries? Is there anything, any reason, why you and I and all men cannot today be

Kind in feeling,
Peaceful in disposition, and
Pure in thought?

I think there is every reason why you and I should make more of

Kindness. One of these reasons is, as has been truly said, "because unkindness contributes so plainly to the misery of life, and kindness contributes so distinctly to its happiness." Just a letter, but there was a sentence in the letter that was very consoling; only a call, but it was something that my neighbor whom I did not know inconvenienced himself to make, and I am duly grateful; only a little attention, the stoppage on the street, the cordial handshake and the words of appreciation for the stand I took on some political question, at the commercial club, in the business men's

meeting, but the sun shines brighter, and I carry my head more erect because of that earnest endorsement. And what is the reverse? The mail brought in at the breakfast table; among others one letter which has a carping, insolent tone, and because of that letter, the food chokes, the appetite goes. Mental poison is in that letter. It enters your brain. You are not the same man all through the day you would have been had it not been for those critical, unjust words. An acquaintance passes you on the street without recognition. Why? What have you done? Disturbing fears, anxious inquiries into your conduct, follow to distract your attention from more important matters. Some chance words are brought to you of what Mrs. A. thought of your conduct last summer; of what Mrs. B. said about the marked attention paid you by the gentlemen, and you go into your room, lock the door, and give way to an indignant flood of tears; some slight editorial hit at your pet reform, some jesting sentence at masculine women, whose homes are untidy and children unkept, make you hot and angry and inclined to resign from your office and have nothing to do with philanthropic affairs.

Does not life contain enough heartaches for you and for me without these pin pricks of criticism? Without these supercilious manners on the part of our acquaintances? Without these innuendoes about our conduct? Without these harsh judgments on our best endeavor? Is not life heavy enough, I say, without all these unnecessary irritations, not one of which really need to be? Well then if it is, if you are hurt and wounded and made sore distressed because of unkindness, why should you wish in return to hurt and wound your neighbors, the shopman, the clerks in the store, your butcher, your errand boys, all the people with whom you come into more or less close contact? Why?

PEACEFULNESS.

What is it that causes a man to go to law and engage in wrangling litigation with his neighbor? What is it that causes hot dispute between acquaintances and leads to bitter hatreds, to duels, to murder? Why do masses of men engage in riots and bloodshed? What leads two nations to war one upon the other?

Jesus, we can imagine, asked himself these questions and he came to the conclusion that though there may be many reasons the underlying reason is misunderstanding, a misunderstanding which leads to anger. Without anger disputes and wars would be impossible, or as a Western editor bluntly phrases it, "Damn you is the first step towards war." It is not, therefore, a matter of surprise to learn that Jesus condemns in severest fashion any use of language which places a stigma upon another human being. If I say to my neighbor "You're a fool," or worse "You're a scoundrel," it is sufficient cause for subjecting me to trial, or for expelling me from the company of the righteous; I must not harbor a grievance against my neighbor for it is likely to expand until, like a sore, it affects my whole system with unkind sensations and vengeful desires, therefore before I come up to church I must try to reconcile myself with my aggrieved neighbor. I must call upon him and do all possible to understand his point of view and have him understand mine. After a reconciliation, then, it will be well for me to make an offering, otherwise my gift to the altar will do little for my soul's good.

Now, I leave it to anyone here present, if he can be happy right after a quarrel. You know how it is in the home just after a small domestic tiff; you know how it is in the club after an acrimonious difference in policy; you know how it is in the store after an

angry talk with one of the clerks. Peace at the centre. Why that is the very first requisite of happiness. Such peace at the centre, as a preliminary to cheeriness, Jesus promises, if we will follow out his instructions. "These things have I spoken unto you," he says, "so that ye may have peace." "In the world ye have tribulation, but be ye of good cheer, I have overcome the world." There is the note struck over and over again. "Be ye of good cheer." "Be ye of good cheer, my peace I give unto you."

PRAISE.

Another cause of anger and the rebellious spirit is fault finding. Bridget in the kitchen, after you have found fault with her, is in a temper, and regardless whether the meat is burned or not; Patrick in the stable feels like giving the horses a good slash with the whip after you have found such severe fault with his driving; James in the packing department swears under his breath after your departure, and brooding on your fault-finding words uses twice the necessary time on the doing up of packages. Machines call seldom for the file but often for the oil. "I am come," said Jesus, "to give the oil of joy for mourning and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." No doubt Bridget and Patrick and James have their days when they are shrouded in the spirit of heaviness. Why not? We have such days, why should they escape? At such times depression, heaviness envelopes them as with a garment. What do we do to exchange this garment for the garment of praise? "Enter into a solemn league," says Amos R. Wells, "with yourself and your God, that before you find fault with a person once, you will first praise him ten times."

PURITY.

Happy are they who are pure in heart, for to them shall be accorded the beatific vision. Pure in heart! Ay, but there's the rub, the difficult task. Sights, sounds, feeling, contact, taste, bring to our minds impressions, stir us in every part. create mental images. No one knows what these thoughts are. Within we are free to give way to emotions, passions, desires, to think what we please. Who is to hinder?

If neither public opinion nor law can exercise jurisdiction over our thoughts, or control them, then is it not all the more essential that we ourselves control them? Every sin, says Jesus, begins in a sin of thought, that is, in some vicious purpose or intention.

Dostoevsky, in his "Crime and Punishment," tells how Raskolnikoff, the student, returning from pawning a jewel, has this vague thought cross his mind: "An intelligent man, who had that old pawnbroker's money, could accomplish anything he liked. It is only necessary to get rid of her." It was but a fleeting thought but by harboring it, it grows, it possesses him. Every hard experience of his outward life appears to bear some relation to the project, *to urge him on to the crime.*

Banquo hears what the witches say, but he does not allow their words to sink into his mind. Macbeth does. Macbeth thinks often of the prophecy, revolves in his mind the awful act which leads to the throne and eventually murders Duncan.

"I am the master of my fate" may not be strictly true. "I am the master of my thought" is strictly true.

How did Jesus find it possible to remain pure in heart, to banish from his mind evil suggestions, to rid himself of the temptation to become influential, to become rich, to become king of the Jews?

The secret is not hard to find. Jesus himself tells us the source of his power. "The words I speak unto

you," he says, "I speak not of myself, but the Father that dwelleth in me, for of mine own self I can do nothing."

Paul and John echo precisely the same fact when they say, "It is God who worketh in you both to will and to do." "Greater is he that is within you than the powers that be in the world."

Do we believe this? Do we realize the latent ability that is within ourselves? Do we realize that there is a power allied to our own souls all encircling, all enriching, all enduring? Yes; but if so, how shall we call on this power? How make its transforming, enriching energy a conscious influence in all we think and do? Again we ask, how did Jesus link himself to the Eternal?

Even as we ask there arises the mental picture of the lonely vigils, the silent days spent in the wilderness, the seasons set apart for contemplation, solitude, prayer. Through prayer Jesus gains his strength, through solitude and contemplation his spirit becomes one with the Eternal Spirit.

We know what the Apostles did not know that "Just as waves of energy pass through earth and rock; just as certain forms of light penetrate our bodies, so the spiritual forces, when we are receptive to them, pour into us." They pour into us and produce their subtle and enduring results. We know this, I say, the early disciples did not. They accepted it on faith. We know that prayer brings calmness, it brings coolness and fearlessness. Some of your friends were on that ill-fated steamer wrecked a year or so ago on the rocks of Bermuda. You have heard them tell of the panic and the terror until one among them said "Let us pray," then fear and terror fled and even the weakest was possessed of a new courage. The agony of Golgotha

never could have been endured without the prayers of Gethsemane.

Prayer brings courage, strength ; it arouses all righteous desires. The oftener a man rises to the mount of prayer and there obtains truer knowledge of the Most High, the oftener his spirit comes into contact with the Almighty Holiness, the more is he transfigured—made divine.

The mission of Jesus was to make people happy.

You and I and all the world are anxious to have peace and joy. They are the qualities promised, if we will follow the precepts of Jesus. Kindness. Peacefulness. Praise. Purity. By practising these we enter on the way which leads to joy and blessedness. "Follow me," said Jesus, "I will lead and be the way."

Shall we follow him ?

When I was a boy I used to play with other boys a game called "Follow my leader." Some one among us was selected to lead and all the others had to imitate his acts. If he performed a difficult feat, that boy who failed to accomplish it had to drop out of the line. Smaller and smaller grew the company. At length the leader attempted some feat which even he could not accomplish, then from the ranks stepped the boy who could do it and from then and on we followed him.

When some one steps out of the ranks of humanity who can do more than Jesus did, who can show greater faith in time of trial, greater righteousness in the hour of temptation, greater love and sympathy for the suffering, greater kindness to enemies as well as to friends, then I will follow him, but until that time I will follow him who promised to his followers, gladness, joy, and the peace which passes all understanding. And you, what will you do? Will you also take this leader for your guide? Will you follow him?

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